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Microaggressions in the Academy: One Black Professor's Narrative

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As one of two Black male instructors in the College of Education at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), I was constantly confronted with racism and microaggressions that hindered my progress, but not my success. These microaggressions are linked to inequities in the academy. Black male instructors continue to experience racism and microaggressions at every level of education. For the purpose of this narrative, I focused on my experience as a Black man teaching at a PWI. Detailing open and honest experiences concerning microaggressions is the first step in creating a pipeline of hope at PWIs for Black male instructors. As a Black male instructor, I examined some of my experiences in a multicultural education course and the role microaggressions played at a prominent PWI.

Racial Microaggressions

In many predominantly White academic settings, people from underrepresented demographics continue to be considered outsiders in their academic workplace and experience various levels of microaggressions (Smith et al., 2007). Pierce (1995) offered a connection between racism as a device of control and race-related stress. He postulated that Black people continuously experience oppressive agents, settings, or conditions in the academy. Pierce also contended that Black people will experience intense racial microaggressions. Pierce (1974) described racism as a psychological illness rooted on the false idea that inferiority is linked to dark skin color. He explained that when exploring “the

substance of today’s racism one must not look for the gross and obvious”; instead, one must recognize and measure the impact of “subtle, cumulative mini-assault” of racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1974, p. 516).

Smith et al. (2006) characterized racial microaggressions as: subtle verbal and nonverbal insults targeting People of Color, often habitually or instinctively; layered insults centered on one’s race, race-gender, class; and other cumulative insults that produce avoidable stress to People of Color. I conceptualize microaggressions as small, subtle, jabbings of racism that pierce the heart, yet seem unidentifiable to White mainstream populations. We learned of microaggressions throughout my graduate experience, but to experience them was daunting. It seemed as if I was in a movie, and I was the main character.

An Urban Setting Is Not for Me

My first semester of teaching evolved into a conundrum that truly questioned my competency as an educator, my ability as an instructor, and my frame of reference as a Black man in academia. I was the only Black male professor teaching in my area of campus. My daily classroom encounters involved a few students questioning statements I made (based on research) regarding culture in the classroom. I believe many of these students did not see diversity as a vault of information but as way to create division in the classroom. Unfortunately, these students did not consider this course, focused on diversity, as relevant to their learning. Rather than culture being capital, they saw culture as a deficit (Gorski, 2009). In multicultural education, recognizing a student’s cultural capital allows teachers to see them as individuals (James et al., 2016). Cultural capital is embodied through speech, behavior, perspectives, and so forth, that

students bring to the classroom each day. Unfortunately, some of my students did not see culture as being a form of capital. My course conceptualized cultural capital as the language, traditions, and home culture students bring to the classroom. Cultural capital allows students' characteristics, experiences, and perspectives to be included in the curriculum (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Throughout my course several students expressed how their belief system identified culture as a deficit which evolved into class debates surrounding the idea.

Only two students questioned the majority of the students, who viewed all students as equal and void of culture. These debates were laced with microaggressions and stereotypes about Black and Hispanic students. In my efforts to utilize research as a tool to challenge deficit thinking, I was perceived as a threat to the students' belief system.

These debates came to a peak when I made a statement about first year teacher placements. I stated that first year teachers, based on demographic research about teachers, typically find themselves working in urban settings (settings that are primarily made up of non-White students) to gain teaching experience. In most suburban and affluent districts, teachers are required to have significant experiences in education before being considered qualified to teach in their district. So, novice teachers often gain this experience in urban school systems that have an ongoing shortage of teachers (Carter & Vavrus, 2018). This statement impacted some of the students on an emotional level. At the conclusion of this particular class, the students who viewed culture as capital expressed support in the statement and the importance of meeting the needs of urban students. Subsequently, these particular students would discuss contemporary topics at the end of class to extend class discourse. These students would also boldly disrupt

narratives in class that countered an inclusive approach to teaching.

Hammer and Nail

The very next day the administrator of undergraduate courses summoned me to her office. The email was vague but clear about my presence being needed the following day. At the PWI, student opinion of an instructor's teaching approaches weighs heavily on employee viability in academia. I knew this meeting was important, especially after the response concerning the debate in my class about first-year teachers working in urban settings. I was about to meet the person with the hammer and nail to end my career as a professor in higher education before it even started. This administrator had the ability to make sure I did not teach at this institution again.

The meeting began with me describing the events of the class incident. I described how we were discussing experiences as first year teachers in urban settings and how understanding multicultural education impacts success. I also shared how some students did not find multicultural education valuable because they did not plan to work in an environment where culture as capital is recognized. The administrator then began sharing her perspective on urban education and first-year teacher career options. I became aware, in the midst of her explanation, that while I may be teaching a course on multicultural education, everyone may not be in support of this ideology in education—yes, even in a college of education. I soon discovered the administrator was describing the expected classroom environment. She was very clear in outlining how I should not create an environment of serious discourse. I should not challenge the status quo in the classroom, including what they learned from home. I was not to question how they saw

culture and race in society and in the classroom. I was told to keep conversations “airy, light, and fluffy.” After this meeting, I was in emotional and psychological distress as a result of this attempt to silence my equity pedagogical approach in a multicultural education course.

Conclusion

Consequently, these experiences had a long-term impact on my pedagogical approach to teaching this course. My experiences shaped my identity as a Black man in academia as well as influenced my dreams and aspirations in the professoriate. Initially, I experienced increased levels of frustration. I concluded that I had much to learn about how to handle applying my research to a multicultural course. I also concluded that I need additional study on how to engage administrators who do not support multicultural education. As I continue to succeed and encounter microaggressions and blatant racism, I have determined to stay the course and strive for positive interactions with my students who are teachable. I believe that most Black male instructors either have experienced or will experience microaggressions just as I did. It is my hope that we all stay focused and determined to make a difference with our students in the academy. I assert that while I attempted to utilize different instructional approaches, none of those approaches reflected challenging belief systems. Therefore, I challenge learning institutions to develop work environments that are equitable.

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